

Norris-Preston Cottage
611 Preston Place
Charlottesville
Virginia

HABS No. VA-1075

HABS
VA,
2-CHAR,
18-

REDUCED COPIES OF MEASURED DRAWINGS
WRITTEN ARCHITECTURAL AND HISTORICAL DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D. C. 20240

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

NORRIS-PRESTON COTTAGE

HABS No. VA-1075

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VA,
2-CHAR
18-

Location: 611 Preston Place
Charlottesville, Virginia 22901

Present Owner: Bernard M. Caperton

Present Status: Private residence

Present Condition: Excellent

Statement of Significance: This small vernacular house is one of the few 19th century board and batten houses remaining in Charlottesville. It appears to have been a two-family dwelling of c. 1840, situated on the site of a farm on the outskirts of the town.

General Description

The origin of the Norris - Preston Cottage is unclear due to the lack of deed references specifically mentioning the structure. However, deeds concerning the tract of land on which the house stood trace the ownership of the property in 1814 to John Nicholas, Clerk of the Albemarle County Court. Nicholas bought two parcels of land equaling 440 acres on October 14, 1814, probably as a land speculation scheme. On the same day he sold the acreage for \$5,000.00 to John Kelly who three years later enlarged the tract by purchasing an adjoining 70 acres. Kelly, a Charlottesville merchant who lived on Park Street apparently operated a farm on the property, evidenced by the sale of farm stock and equipment after his death in 1830. An inventory of the goods sold on November 17, 1830 included slaves, oxen, cows, pigs and "plantation tools".(Appendix B) He bequeathed to his daughter, Cynthia T. (Mrs. Opie) Norris "my farm lying above Charlottesville containing four hundred and seventy-five acres, be it more or less, with all its appertenances."¹ However, there is no mention of any existing structures.

Tradition has it that Kelly may have constructed the house for his slaves or tenant farmers, nevertheless, evidence of circular sawmarks in structural members dates the cottage to c. 1840 at the earliest. Kelly's farm included the ridge east of the present site of the University of Virginia. Apparently Jefferson had been interested in acquiring the ridge as the most suitable site for his Central College. Kelly, however, according to a letter written by George Randolph, an agent who assisted Jefferson in the negotiations, refused to sell, as he was a federalist. Kelly reputedly

said that he would see Mr. Jefferson "at the devil before he should have it at any price."²

It is more likely that the Norris family may have built the house as tenant farmer or slave housing, as they are known to have lived on Court Square in the city. In 1838 tax records show that \$500.00 in building improvements were made to the farm, perhaps signaling the construction of all or part of the two-family dwelling.

The Norris family owned the property until 1854 when it was broken up and 102 $\frac{1}{4}$ acres containing the house site was sold to William T. McCarty for \$5,067.50. Within three years Sally McCoy bought the property for \$6,300.00, in turn selling the entire tract for \$12,000.00 in 1863 to Thomas and Anna Preston. Tax records aid in explaining this increase in value as they indicate major construction activity, probably the large frame house within thirty feet of the cottage in 1857.³ The Prestons named their home "Wyndhurst" and while no documentation has been found, traditionally the cottage has been thought to have been slave quarters and/or a kitchen for the estate because of its proximity to the main house. The smaller building has been designated as a "cottage" only to distinguish it from the Preston House next door.

In 1890 the Prestons sold all but eleven acres of their land to the Charlottesville Land Company, for \$11,000.00 for sub-division purposes. The area had become known as Preston Heights and the withheld land became the Preston Reservation on the plat of the sub-division.⁴ Anna Preston's heir, Anna P. Lockwood finally sold the estate and its buildings in 1919 to the Preston Place Corporation, which resulted in the sub-division of the remaining eleven acres. The cottage, situated on the lot designated #23,

General Description cont.

was sold to Albert S. Bolling, part-owner of the corporation on April 12, 1920. He also acquired the other three lots in the center of the estate, including the "old Preston Mansion known as 'Wyndhurst'".⁵ Dr. and Mrs. Dumas Malone rented the small house from the Bollings from 1925-28 when he was a graduate student at the University of Virginia. Dr. Malone recalls the house as very simple with a bathroom and kitchen addition on the rear. At the time of his residence in the house the only access to the second floor rooms was by the exterior stairway on the front porch. From 1927 to the present the house has had several owners with Agnes Symmers living in the house nearly thirty years from 1935-1962. The most recent owner acquired the property in 1967 and has taken an active interest in preserving the original fabric of the structure and discovering its long history.

FOOTNOTES

1. Albemarle County Courthouse, Will Book 10, p. 133.
2. Letter to Professor Cabell from George W. Randolph, February 27, 1856, Manuscripts Department, University of Virginia Library, Accession No. 38-111, Box No. 43.
3. Unpublished Historic Landmarks Survey, Charlottesville, VA.
4. City of Charlottesville, Virginia, Deed Book 34, p. 478.
5. Ibid., Deed Book 35, p. 305.

CHAIN OF TITLE

The following is the chain of title to the property on which the Norris-Preston Cottage was built, and for the structure as well following its construction c. 1840. Deed and will records can be found at the Records Office at the Albemarle County Courthouse and the Charlottesville District Courthouse. Each record is referenced by either County Deed Book (ACDB), City Deed Book (DB) or Will Book (WB) followed by the volume number and page.

1814, October 14, ACDB 19-142

Grantor: Alexander Garrett and Evelina
Grantee: John Nicholas
Amount: \$4,000.00
Acreage: 331 acres

"... it being the land (in part) that the said Alexander Garrett purchased from John Carr, William G. Garner and Cornelius Schenk... on the 13th day of January 1808..."

1814, October 14, ACDB 19-144

Grantor: John H. Craven and Elizabeth
Grantee: John Nicholas
Amount: \$500.00
Acreage: 109 acres

"...above town of Charlottesville on south side of road running from Charlottesville to Jarman's or Brown's Gap...purchased from Brown Rives and Co., William G. Garner and William W. Hening."

1814, October 14, ACDB 19-145

Grantor: John Nicholas and Louisa H. Nicholas
Grantee: John Kelly
Amount: \$5,000.00
Acreage: 440 acres

"lands...near town of Charlottesville..."

Chain of Title cont.

1817, September 1, ACDB 20-426

Grantor: John Alphin
Grantee: John Kelly
Amount : \$1,470.00
Acreage: 70 acres

"...a certain tract or parcel of land lying and being in the County of Albemarle on the water of Meadow Creek..."

1830, August 26, WB 10-133

John Kelly
to
Cynthia T. Kelly

"I also give to my daughter Cynthia T. Norris, my farm lying above Charlottesville containing four hundred and seventy-five acres... with all its appertenances to her."

1839, April 1, WB 13-276

Opie Norris
to
T. Norris

"I give to my beloved wife T. Norris...all my Estate both real and personal..."

1854, January 6, ACDB 52-228

Grantor: Ann Evelina Norris and others
Grantee: William T. McCarty
Amount : \$5,067.50
Acreage: 102 $\frac{1}{4}$ acres

"...the said piece or parcel of land lying and being in the County of Albemarle, and being a part of the tract of the estate of Opie Norris, dec'd..."

1857, June 26, ACDB 56-214

Grantor: William T. McCarty, trustee and Mary E. Terrell
Grantee: Sally Ann McCoy
Amount : \$6,300.00
Acreage: 102 $\frac{1}{4}$ acres

"... land formerly belonged to heirs of Opie Norris."

1863, January 3, ACDB 61-156

Grantor: Sally McCoy, Henry P.R. McCoy and Caroline Elizabeth McCoy
Grantee: Thomas L. Preston and Anna M. Preston
Amount : \$12,000.00
Acreage: 102 $\frac{1}{4}$ acres

"...all that tract of land lying North of the University of Virginia...
formerly belonged to the estate of Opie Massie (Norris), dec'd"

1903, WB 32-95

Anna M. Preston
to
Anna P. Lockwood

"..., an undivided half interest in my home place on "Preston Heights"
in Albemarle County, Virginia and commonly known in the family as
'Wyndhurst' and containing as is supposed about eleven acres more or
less."

1919, September 12, DB 34-28

Grantor: Anna P. Lockwood and George R. Lockwood
Grantee: Preston Place Corporation
Amount : \$37,500.00
Acreage: 11 acres

"...all of that certain tract or parcel of land situated in the city
of Charlottesville, Virginia...whereon Anna M. Preston resided at the
time of her death, near the University of Virginia,..."

1919, November 20, DB 34-478

Plat of Preston Place Corporation lots, showing numbers and location
of each lot.

1920, April 20, DB 35-305

Grantor: Preston Place Corporation
Grantee: Albert S. Bolling
Amount : \$4,500.00
Lots : 23 and 26

Chain of Title cont.

1927, October 1, DB 58-358

Grantor: Albert S. Bolling and Sue D. Bolling and Bartlett Bolling, Jr.
Grantee: John S. Battle and John S. White
Amount : \$5.00
Lots : 23, 24, and the northern 10 feet of Lots 25 and 26

1928, February 10, DB 59-485

Grantor: John S. Battle and John S. White, Trustees
Grantee: Jane N. B. Hildreth
Amount : \$22,500.00
Lots : 23, 24, and the northern 10 feet of Lots 25 and 26

1929, January 9, DB 70-62

Grantor: Jane N. B. Hildreth
Grantee: Sara H. Fletcher
Lot : Part of Lot #23

"...certain lot or parcel of land, with the improvements thereon,
fronting 70' on Winehurst Circle on the East..."

1935, June 20, DB 86-87

Grantor: Sara H. Fletcher and Marshall P. Fletcher
Grantee: Agnes L. Symmers
Amount : \$6,000.00

"...said lot of land comprises parts of two certain lots...conveyed
to...Sara H. Fletcher...from Mrs. Jane N. B. Hildreth."

1962, July 10, DB 233-305

Grantor: Agnes L. Symmers
Grantee: Maury Tice Flowers
Amount : \$8,200.00

1962, October 1, DB 236-44

Grantor: Maury Tice Flowers and W.H. Flowers
Grantee: Russell Dexter
Amount : \$7,000.00

1963, August 30, DB 244-368

Grantor: Russell Dexter
Grantee: Nancy Eves Scanlon
Amount : \$19,500.00

1966, June 1, DB 278-378

Grantor: N.E. Scanlon
Grantee: Durive E. Gerard
Amount : \$20,500.00

1967, August 23, DB 289-277

Grantor: Durive E. Gerard
Grantee: Bernard M. Caperton
Amount : \$20,000.00
Lots : Parts of 23 and 24

"...98.5' on Preston Place (formerly known as Wyndhurst Circle)..."

General Description

The Norris-Preston Cottage has had several additions to the original four-room structure. For the purposes of this report, the following description will be primarily concerned with the original rectangular structure and porch and dormer additions. The cottage is a timber frame, board and batten, 1½ story structure with a gable roof. The building is 36 feet long by 18 feet wide by 20 feet high. A large central chimney, with four fireplaces originally divided the interior in half, each side having a single room per floor. The front or east wall is windowless, with two doors giving access to the separate living areas. Access to the second floor may have originally been by interior ladders or small staircases. Presently an exterior stairway in the center of the porch area and a recent interior stairway provide communication between floors.

As a structure on the Norris farm it would appear that the double house arrangement was for housing tenant farmers or slaves. It is possible that the original house may have been one half of the present building, having been built as a claim house on the farm property. It is probable that the porch, exterior stairway and dormers were added during the time it was owned by the Preston family (1863-1919). Expansions to the rear have been made throughout this century, retaining the board and batten exterior sheathing and complimentary metal roofing. The present owner has added a kitchen wing to the north.

Stylistically the house is difficult to describe as there is little or no sophisticated architectural features. Simplicity in plan, construction materials and decoration is the rule in this rural vernacular structure.

Exterior

Overall Dimensions: The house, including the front porch measures 39' 3" along the north-south axis and 27' 0" along the east-west axis. The apex of the roof measures 20' 0" from ground level (on the south) or from the top of the foundation.

Foundation: The original coursed stone foundation is exposed on the north wall, its height being 19" high. Concrete blocks 16" high serve as the foundation on the west wall and the porch is supported by a poured concrete base which frames the flagstone flooring. The foundation is not visible on the east or south wall.

Wall Construction: Plain board and batten wall sheathing of varying widths. On the west, south and the southern half of the east wall the battens are of an inconsistent width from $3\frac{1}{4}$ " to $5\frac{1}{2}$ " wide. On the northern half of the east wall and on the north wall they seem to be less worn, and are $2\frac{1}{2}$ -3" wide, perhaps indicating a later date. This may be evidence of two construction dates for the entire house. The board and batten on the porch walls were installed by the present owner, replacing existing lattice work. (Illustrations 1 and 2) The base of the walls are covered with a baseboard which varies from 12" on the north wall to 6" on the south wall. Separating the baseboard from the board and battens on the east and south walls is an 1" wide bead moulding. (Photograph 12) The dormer window walls also have plain board and batten sheathing. However, the walls of the recessed entry on the second floor are plain vertical planks. Flat-headed nails are used throughout the board and batten sheathing and the white-washing on the walls is in fair condition.

Structural System: The framing is heavy-timber, with the walls being 7" thick on the first floor and 11" thick on the second floor. Much of the frame is not accessible to view, however, through an opening in the first floor floorboards, the rear sill and chimney girt can be seen. They are unsquared beams flattened on the top and measuring 12" wide for the sill and 9" wide for the girt. A visible corner post in the NW corner measures 7" wide and has a rough hewn finish. It was photographed when the present owner built the addition to the north. (Illustrations 3 and 4)

Porches: On the east wall is an attached porch whose shed roof is continuous with that of the house. It is supported by wooden logs resting on a concrete foundation surrounding the ground level stone floor. An open, straight stairway

Porches cont. on posts parallel to the front wall leads to the second floor rooms via a recessed entry the width of the chimney.

Chimney: A single central brick chimney straddles the ridge of the roof. It is 6' 6" high by 3' 0" long by 2' 2" wide in stretcher bond.

Openings:

Doorways and doors: There are two main doorways on the east facade, each opening into the center of the interior rooms. The doors are original, however, the plain trim on the exterior is not. They are painted a flat yellow-ochre color. Each is approximately 9" above the porch floor level, parallel to the base of the board and batten sheathing. The doors are board and batten with three interior battens with the southern door having a five-light transom window. The northern door has a modern glass door on the exterior which has not been recorded in the drawings. The wide door sills appear to be original as they are quite worn. On the upper floor in the recessed entry area is a third door, also board and batten and with plain trim.

Windows: Renovation work in 1962 included the installation of all new windows, both the plain trim and sash. The east wall has no windows presently and both the side and rear walls have 6-over-6 double hung sash windows. Sometime during the past the east wall may have had windows as evidenced by cut areas in the vertical sheathing where windows were boarded up. They are towards the center of the house from each front door. The present owner built the large double 6-over-6 window on the north wall. (Illustration 6) The dormer casement windows, two on the front and one on the rear roof, have no shutters, as is the case for all the windows. However, the first floor windows on the south and west walls have the metal hinges for shutters.

Roof: The gable roof has a 37° angle and is a 17" metal standing seam roof with projecting eaves. The gabled dormers measure approximately 40° with deep overhanging eaves. Sloping standing seams above the line of the dormers deflect rain water. The roof cornices of both dormers and main roof feature a simple fascia. Exposed log rafters under the roofline of the east and west walls are long decorative, as the rafters are squared off farther up under the roof itself. The roof is painted a flat yellow-ochre, and there are no gutters on the original roof.

Interior

- Floor Plans:** There is no basement below the simple two-room plan of both the first and second floor. The central chimney with flanking walls probably originally separated the two living areas, each with its own entrance.
- Stairway:** A two flight stair with an open well is in the NE corner of the house. It was built during the 1930's according to the present owner, to provide easier access to the second floor rooms. It features an open-string stair, plain balusters and newel post. Painted a dark brown, a small cupboard has been built into the crawl space beneath the stair.
- Flooring:** The flooring of both stories appears to be original with pine floor boards ranging from 7" to 12" wide. The original flooring of the southern room on the first floor is not accessible to view. Presently it has modern hardwood flooring with wall-to-wall carpeting. The underside of a board in the northern room shows slightly curving sawmarks, thus giving a date of around 1840 as the earliest possible construction date. In the northern room on the second floor, a section of the flooring has been cut and different planks inserted perhaps indicating an earlier small staircase in the center of the house. (Plan drawing) The floors are unpainted and the fireplace hearths are finished in stone on the first floor and in brick on the second floor.
- Walls and Ceilings:** The interior walls are painted sheetrock, or vertical planks in the case of the first floor closet wall and the walls above the second floor fireplaces. (Section drawing) 6" baseboards appear on most walls, and there is no interior cornice moulding. The color scheme in all the rooms is white with brown or unpainted trim.
- The ceiling of the first floor has exposed $2\frac{1}{2}$ " x 8" joists with additional support surrounding the hearth areas above. (Photograph 13) They appear to have been cut with a circular saw. The ceilings of the second floor rooms are sheetrock.
- The four fireplaces have simple brick openings, three of which are without wooden surrounds. A modern mantelpiece and surround has been added to the northern second floor room. There is no apparent bond pattern to the chimney brickwork and all fireplaces are functional. The northern first floor fireplace has been partially closed in with brick and a modern wood burning stove installed.

- Doorways and Doors:** All interior doors are unpainted board and batten with plain trim. The door in the recessed entry and the rear door to the additions has slightly more ornate modern architrave trim.
- Interior Trim:** A closet has been built into the northern second floor room. Modern roof rafters are exposed on the interior ceiling of the closet, providing no clue of the original roof construction.
- Hardware:** The original doors of the house have a variety of 19th century hardware, including door latches and box locks. The present owner has installed bolt locks.
- Mechanical and Electrical Equipment:** There is a modern hot air heating system and electrical outlets. The original house has never had modern plumbing installed for a bathroom or kitchen. All such facilities are located in the rear additions and kitchen wing.

Site and Surroundings

Orientation and General Setting: The building faces the southeast on Preston Place, formerly Wyndhurst Circle, and is situated on a rectangular lot. There is a 6' high wooden paling fence on the south and part of the west boundary line. The north boundary line is marked at ground level by a stone wall with a concrete topping. The north corner of the property is bounded by a fallen rubble wall with a metal stake at the corner. The lot slopes slightly down toward the north, with a drop of several feet on the opposite side of the stone and rubble walls. The house is approached by the driveway, the brick walkways and natural wood stepping stones noted on the site plan being rarely used except for access to the garden which surrounds the house. A rectangular rubble foundation to the north of the house has been made into a sunken garden. Tradition has it that it is the foundation for the Preston estate icehouse or icepit, although no documentary evidence has been found to substantiate the claim. The house 28' directly to the south is the Preston House, "Wyndhurst". Like the Norris-Preston Cottage, it has had many additions, and it is the roofline of the original dwelling which has been drawn on the site plan.

The neighborhood surrounding the house was established following the sub-division of the Preston Reservation in 1919, therefore most of the homes are of a much later date and character. Nothing of the original landscaping remains. The present owner has incorporated oriental garden techniques, wild flower plantings and art work to create a personal and unique landscape design, very different from the colonial revival homes and fraternities adjacent to it. The significance of the house is its value as a physical representation of the once rural character of an area now a residential neighborhood of the city.

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Interviews

Bernard M. Caperton

Dumas Malone

Project Information

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